

4-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Arn, W. (2007). Learning to Love – At Any Age. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 18(2), 19-28. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol18/iss2/4>

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Learning to Love — At Any Age

Win Arn

What is it?

It is not one of God's attributes. It is the sum total of all God's attributes.

It is the reason Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world.

There can never be too much of it . . . and there can easily be too much of everything else.

With it, people flourish and grow. Without it, people wither and die.

With it, people become Christ-like. Without it, people become Pharisee-like.

With it, the Gospel is irrefutable. Without it, the Gospel is nothing.

What is it?

It is caring; it is kind; it is courteous. It is gracious; it is self-giving; it is optimistic. It is springtime in the mind . . . sunshine in the heart.

Without it, you can speak in angelic languages, yet be only a big noise. Without it you can have great wisdom and understand deep truths, yet be totally ignorant.

Without it, you can have great faith, so great that mountains will shake and quake and move, yet be powerless. What is it?

LOVE!

Love is the great miracle worker. It smoothes irritations and conflicts. It turns the worst past into the best future. It turns great sinners into glorious saints.

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 2007

“Someday,” says Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Shardawn), “after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity . . . we will harness for God the energies of *love* and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.”

Is it possible for us to love more fully? . . . To love others as we, ourselves would like to be loved? To love the way Christ showed us to love?

Is it possible for our church to love more than we do now?

Today, many people today feel inadequate to express or share love. Some are handicapped because they grew up in homes where love was seldom experienced. Others are living in splintered families where love seems to have already failed. Some have been hardened by past rejections. Whatever the reasons, most of us find it difficult to express love.

A fascinating experiment was recently conducted at the University of Southern California where subjects were assigned to approach people whom they loved, and verbally express that love to them. Almost all participants later reported they felt: “tongue-tied . . . ill-at-ease . . . awkward . . . embarrassed.” Some could not even complete the assignment. In discussing their experiences after the assignment, participants agreed that: “it was strange, indeed, that so many found it threatening to communicate love!” The researcher went on to observe that, “it then became obvious why we hear the voice of love so seldom, and when it is heard it is spoken so softly, so shyly. This is true even though we have learned that unexpressed love is the greatest cause of our sorrow and regrets.”

SO, WHAT IS LOVE?

When we are commanded to “*love* one another,” or to *love* our neighbors, or to *love* our enemies — what is meant by the word “love”?

The classic discussion on the characteristics of love is found in the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Hailed as a masterpiece on love, Chapter 13 provides beautiful insight into the practical meaning of love. In this chapter, we discover some of the characteristics of love:

- it is patient
- it is kind
- love searches for truth
- love holds up under pressure
- love always believes the best
- love looks to the future, not the past
- it is consistent

From this chapter, we also learn what love is not:

- it is not jealous
- it does not brag
- it does not embarrass others
- it is not arrogant
- love is not selfish
- it does not remember a wrong suffered
- it does not easily anger

Yet, while Paul excellently describes well the *characteristics* of love, he does not precisely define it.' In seeking a definition of love, I have tried to identify the very basic nature of love found in Scripture . . . in God's love ... as modeled by Christ, Himself. We read:

"For God so *loved* the world that He *gave* His Son (Jn. 3:16)

In Romans 5: "But God demonstrates his own *love* for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

John 15: 13 tells us: "The greatest *love* shown is when a person lays down his life for his friends."

By using these and other Scriptures, I would like to propose a definition of love. You will find it in your notes:

"Love is intentionally doing something caring or helpful for another person, in Jesus' name, regardless of the cost or consequence to oneself."

Let's consider the key words and phrases of this definition.

First:

"intentionally" Love does not happen by accident. Love happens because it is planned and premeditated. Love is determining to act in a particular way.

Next, the words: *"doing something"* Love is action. If it is not seen, or observed, or experienced on a regular basis, there is cause to doubt whether it is really love. I Jn. 3:18 says: "Let's stop just saying we love people; let's really love them and show it by our actions."

"caring" The dictionary defines caring as "a feeling of concern and protection." The word is most often and obviously seen in parents' caring for their children. The ultimate caring for a person is in giving one's own life to protect the object of one's love. I Jn. 3:16 says: "We know Christ's love for us in that he gave his life. Therefore, we ought also give our lives for our brethren."

"helpful" The Greek word means "lend strength to." Where a need exists, love responds. Ecclesiastes says: "Whereas one person is weak, two are strong." Love builds up the other person. Love makes up for the person's weakness in certain areas

through the strength of the other.

“for another person” Love is always focused on a person. Love does not exist in a vacuum. We cannot sit alone in a corner . . . and love. The well-being of the person who is loved motivates action.

“in Jesus’ name” This means that we are doing an act of love, in the spirit of Jesus . . . with the same motivation that Christ would have done that caring act.

“regardless of the cost or consequence to oneself.” True love puts others ahead of oneself. It does not say, “I love you if it doesn’t cost anything . . . or if it’s convenient . . . or if I don’t hurt myself in the process.” Can you imagine God putting those conditions on His love for us? Ephesians 5 says: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

HOW ARE YOU AT LOVING?

In your notes are nine questions that provide a clue to your love skills. Take a moment and read them to yourself, and reflect on how you might answer.

So, if Scripture tells us to: be imitators of God and “live a life of love,” what do we do? I would like to suggest eight simple, yet powerful steps for learning to love. You may be 10 years old . . . 50 . . . or 90. These steps will help God’s love flow through you to those around you in a wonderful and refreshing new way. Follow along in your notes . . .

STEP ONE: Make a “Love Covenant” with God

Without serious commitment, you cannot love. All you can do is *respond* to the love of others. And, as Christ said, what good is that? Even the sinners love those who love them.

Loving is a life-style, not an on-again, off-again activity. A “love covenant” is our personal statement to God of our desire to love the way he wants us to love. When we make a “love-covenant” with God we are telling Him that we are personally willing to, as the Apostle Paul said, “live a life of love.”

You might find it helpful to write out your love-covenant with God. It is your request for His help and strength in fulfilling this new priority in your life — love.

STEP TWO: Identify Those Who Need Your Love

There are people in your life that God wants to love... through you. He has placed those people in your life at this very moment. And you are God’s connection to them. They will expe-

rience His love, when they experience your love.

It may help to think of four different groups of people to whom you are God's love connection. There are people in each category both inside, and outside the church.

First, and most obvious, is your *Family*. Father, mother, spouse, children, siblings, in-laws, grandparents, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. All those related to you biologically or through marriage.

Next are *Friends*. These are people you enjoy being around. You invite them to dinner. You go to recreational activities together. You share yourself with them, and they with you. They're your friends.

A third category is *Neighbors*. Christ commanded his followers to "love your neighbor." When asked who is my neighbor, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of a loving act to a person in need. The Apostle John also calls believers to love those in need (I Jn 3:16), when he said: "If a man has enough to live on, and yet sees his brother in need shuts his heart against him, how can it be said that divine love dwells in him?" Your neighbor is someone in your path with a physical, spiritual, or emotional obstacle that you can help him/her overcome. Your neighbor in need may be in the church, or they may be living right next door.

A fourth category is *Enemies*. In Matthew 5:44, after Christ issues his well-known command to "love your enemies," He goes on to explain that enemies are a) those who speak badly of you, b) those who hate you, c) those who mistreat you, and d) those who persistently harass you.

STEP THREE: Act First

Often we wait for the other person to make the first move. Will he stop? Will she smile? Will he speak first? Will she call or invite me over? When it comes to intentional love ... always act first! Don't wait for the other person. Act as though the responsibility for the initiation and growth of that loving relationship depends entirely on you.

And not just once, but again and again ... Make a life-style of acting first!

STEP FOUR: Communicate

Research indicates that people believe the most important ingredient for loving relationships is communication.

As communication deepens, love grows. There are levels of communication at which we interact. These levels of communication are "stepping stones" to deeper relationships with people.

We cannot love as Christ calls us to, when our conversations are always superficial. As you begin to intentionally love the people you have identified, ask yourself, "on what level do I communicate with each person?"

The first level of communication is the *exchange of cliches*. "Hi, how are you?" And whether we feel like it or not, our response is "Fine, how are you?" At this level, we don't do much except share superficial words. "So, have a nice day." "You, too."

The second level of communication is the *exchange of information*. Talk is about things that are impersonal and non-threatening — the weather, the ball game, the job, a television program, world events. "Looks like rain."

The third level is when we begin to share something about who we are — the *exchange of our attitudes*. This level begins the sharing of oneself with another. "Here is what's really important to me

The fourth, and most intimate level of communication, is when we share who we really are — the exchange of feelings, emotions, joys, and fears. There is a difference between exchanging opinions (the third level), and exchanging feelings (the fourth level). "I feel we should do this. . . ." is an opinion. "I feel anxious about this . . ." is a feeling. Intimacy comes in sharing openly with another person. This level of communication requires a well-developed level of mutual trust.

Sometimes we communicate very well when first beginning a loving relationship ... when we are at the first or second level. But we can easily stagnate at one of these levels. Try moving up from your present level to the next. Go beyond cliches. Talk about more than the daily news or the weather. Stretch yourself beyond intellectual ideas. Take a tentative step toward sharing your feelings. Admit some of your fears, your hurts, your frustrations, your disappointments ... and share your joys!

STEP FIVE: Empathize

Empathy is defined as: "identifying with, or experiencing the thoughts, feelings, or attitudes of another person." In a sense, you become that person. You see the world through their eyes. You experience what they experience . . . you feel the way they feel.

The Associated Press recently featured a moving example of loving empathy. It was a story about a young man with cancer, and of his friends and family who tried to say they cared. Here is part of the article:

Manuel Garcia feared that when he shaved his head to get

rid of the patches of hair left by chemotherapy,” I would feel very self-conscious that everyone would stare at me.”

He didn’t need to worry.

Before Garcia was released from the Milwaukee Medical Complex after treatment, his friend and three relatives came into his room with bald heads.

“I woke up, and just started laughing,” said Garcia. “Then they told me, ‘We’re here so you won’t be alone.’

When he arrived home, his house and neighborhood were teeming with bald heads — all in the name of love for Manuel Garcia, in his fight against cancer. “My oldest boy had beautiful hair,” said Garcia of his son who had wanted his head shaved “Last night he said, ‘Daddy, I did it because I love you.’”

Dale Wetzel, age 26, said: “I cut my hair because I’ve known him for 15 years and I love him like a father. It helped me to understand how he felt; it made me feel good inside.”

When Garcia had been diagnosed as having cancer, he was extremely depressed. “But,” he says, “I’m ready for anything now. I feel 100% better.”

STEP SIX: Identify a Love Opportunity

Is there a hurt or an opportunity where your love can help? Jesus spoke of love that responds to needs in Matthew 25.

“For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me water; I was a stranger and you invited me into your home; naked and you clothed me; sick and in prison, and you visited me. Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Sir, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you anything to drink? Or a stranger and help you? Or naked, and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you? And I, the King, will tell them, ‘When you did it to these my brothers, you were doing it to me.’”

The love opportunity may be a physical need. It may be an emotional need; a relational need; or a spiritual need.

Everyone has needs. As you improve your communication and then empathize with the person, you will discover clear opportunities to take loving actions. Then, you can take the next step ...

STEP SEVEN: Respond with a Caring Gift

A well thought-out gift is a powerful expression of love. Look at the greatest giver and gift of all ... God and His Son.

Here are four characteristics of a good gift:

A good gift is *meaningful* ... based on the needs of the person receiving it.

A good gift is *sacrificial* ... or it is just a convenience.

A good gift is *unexpected* ... rather than predictable, due to protocol or expectation.

A good gift is *unconditionally* . . . with no expectation of return.

Gifts are not always purchased at the local shopping mall. You might give the gift of forgiveness to a person who is in need of it; there is the gift of appreciation to a person who feels neglected; there is the gift of support to a person who feels alone and uncertain. Whatever the need, yours may be the gift that is needed most.

STEP EIGHT: Share Yourself

Sharing your most treasured possession is hard to do, because it's all you have ... it is you. The ultimate step of love is to give yourself to another. Wedding vows between a new husband and wife are perhaps the most visible form of this commitment to love. But sharing yourself need not be limited to one person, or one family.

Sharing yourself is when love-actions become a way of life to those in your love connections. Sharing yourself is loving another person as yourself.

In a sense, "sharing yourself" isn't really an eighth step to take, as much as it is a result of having taken the first seven steps enough times with enough people to where you actually *become* a loving person.

For each person it will be different. It means more than a one-time gift. Sharing yourself is far more of a sacrifice. It means giving all that you are. It goes to the very essence of who you are and what you hold dear. It is imitating the love modeled by Christ. It is striving toward the kind of love Christ asks from us when we follow Him: "Be ye perfect, even as my Father in heaven is perfect." (Mt. 5:48)

It is easier to move on to this ultimate step of sharing yourself if we remember that we are really just channels for God's *love* to the people in our "love connections." Through our love, others begin to experience the person and power of that perfect love.

New Found Riches

As we conclude our time together this morning, I would like to tell you a wonderful true story, which I discovered a few years ago. It took place in the Rocky Mountains over 100 years

ago. For me, the story illustrates how we are surrounded by opportunities of love with people around us. We may not realize the great possibilities that can be found in developing a deeper love connection with these people God has put into our life. But if we open our eyes to the possibilities, they are there.

“GOLD! GOLD!” were the shouts echoing through the hills near the town of Leadville, Colorado during the 1860’s. The country was in the midst of the gold rush, and men by the thousands searched for their fortunes in the bottom of their panning tins. But sixteen years later the ruins of Leadville told of a boomtown gone bust. In the nearby “California Gulch” (named after the gold dreams of the 49ers out west), only remnants of abandoned cabins and sluice boxes remained. A few diehard prospectors could still be found rewashing the gulch gravel for pocket money.

The California Gulch had a nasty reputation among the veteran prospectors. “It’s that black sand!” they complained. “It gums up the riffles in sluice boxes. It fills panning holes we dug the day before. It stains and ruins clothes.” The black sand seemed to cover every gold nugget with grime and grit, and make mockery of any attempt to find one’s fortune. While prospectors came to Leadville in great numbers, they soon left discouraged, cursing the black sand, and moving on in search of easier streams to riches.

Into the remnants of the abandoned mines and sluice boxes of the California Gulch came two mining men, William H. Stevens and Alvinus B. Wood. Convinced there was still gold beneath the surface, they began buying up old claims. Initial gold finds heightened their efforts and expectations. But soon they, too, encountered the problems of the earlier prospectors. The black sand forced delays and hampered progress until it appeared the entire project would fall victim to the wretched grit.

One day Stevens decided to send a sample of “that black stuff” to the East Coast for analysis. To their surprise, the men found the black sand was lead carbonate ... loaded with silver!

Stevens and Wood staked lode claims throughout the California Gulch and opened the Rock Mine, the first producing silver mine in the district. They became fabulously rich in a matter of years!

The black sand ... which miners and prospectors had cursed as an abominable intrusion in the pursuit of their golden dreams, contained wealth that would have made them rich beyond their wildest imaginations! The sandy California Gulch yielded fortunes in silver, compared to pittance in gold.

All around you ... are love opportunities hidden in the

“black sand.” People who represent a wealth of meaningful, loving relationships. While you can cast them aside as a nuisance and intrusion into your life, you can also see them from a new perspective, and discover the hidden possibilities of love which lie buried in each of them, which hold riches in love beyond your greatest imagination!